

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY
AS A BILDUNGSROMAN

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In chapter LII of *The Portrait of A Lady* (1811)¹ when Isabel Archer, the heroine of the novel, is leaving Rome for England to see her dying cousin Ralph Touchett after her visit to her step-daughter Pansy Osmond at the convent, she learns from Madame Merle that it had been Ralph's idea that she be made a rich woman by her uncle. The revelation of Ralph's arrangement shocks Isabel Immensely. In fact, she blinks at this sudden revelation and "stood staring." Henry James, on this occasion, metaphorically describes Isabel as one who "seemed to-day to live in a world illumined by lurid flashes" (II, p. 338). The metaphor James employs here is vivid and quite to the point. It not only reflects Isabel's sudden realization of her present situation, but also indicates her awareness of the fact that she has long been living in a world of phantasmagoria, "illumined by lurid flashes" which prevent her from perceiving and facing the genuine reality of life.

The Portrait of a Lady belongs to James's middle period. James takes up again in this novel the international theme—a theme which he has explored so thoroughly in such works as *The American*, *The Europeans*, and "Daisy Miller"—and gives a full-length sketch of the embarrassing situation in which the new American encounters the old European culture. The action of the novel concerns mainly the pilgrimage of Isabel Archer which leads her from ignorance and innocence to knowledge and maturity. *The Portrait of a Lady*, then, is a Bildungsroman. In other words, the portrait of Isabel Archer is

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¹ All citations of *The Portrait of a Lady* in this paper are from *The New York Edition of Henry James* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1970) and will be noted parenthetically with volume number and page number in the text.

one of an innocent young girl who, in her quest for genuine knowledge about life and in the course of her growth from girlhood to womanhood, has undergone a series of hardships, sufferings, and humiliations.

Isabel first impresses us as “a young lady” (I, p. 16), “unexpectedly pretty” (I, p. 17) and “very fond of . . . liberty” (I, p. 24). She is quite intellectual and eager to know the world:

She saw the young men who came in large numbers to see her sisters; but as a general thing they were afraid of her; they had a belief that some special preparation was required for talking with her. Her reputation of reading a great deal hung about her like the cloudy envelope of a goddess in an epic; it was supposed to engender difficult questions and to keep the conversation at a low temperature. The poor girl liked to be thought clever, but she hated to be thought bookish; she used to read in secret and, though her memory was excellent, to abstain from showy reference. She had a great desire for knowledge, but she really preferred almost any source of information to the printed page; she had an immense curiosity about life and was constantly staring and wondering. She carried *within* herself a great fund of life, and her deepest enjoyment was to feel the continuity between the movements of her soul and the agitations of the world. (I, p. 45)

Like the novice of the Bildungsroman, Isabel desires to see the world, and like Eve, “the Miltonic archetype of all feminine innocence,”² she feels greatly curious about life. François Jost points out in a study of the Bildungsroman that “the agent of Bildung is the world,” and that “the man of the world would therefore appear to be the perfect hero of such a novel.”³ This is precisely the case of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Isabel, for instance, “had seen very little of the evil of the world” (I, p. 69); therefore, “She had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action” (I, p. 68). This, as Isabel will learn, of course is but a false image and an idealized vision of the world. The lessons of the world will put an end to her cloistered in-

² Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), p. 125.

³ *Introduction to Comparative Literature* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), p. 136.

nocence, mark her, mature her, and finally form her, so that at the close of the novel, her vision will be drastically different from her previous conception.

Being so anxious to go into the world and to taste the possibilities of life, Isabel, like the protagonist of a typical *Bildungsroman* who usually "leaves the repressive atmosphere of home . . . to make his way independently in the city,"⁴ accepts the offer of her fairy-godmother aunt unhesitatingly to leave her Albany home for Europe with the prospect of beginning a new life. Isabel's leaving her hometown also corresponds to the escape motif which appears so frequently in American literature.⁵ Sam Bluefarb points out that the "escape generally implies a flight from one reality to another."⁶ One significant feature of the escape is that "wherever the escape led, it led further, deeper into life, so that, as such, it rested on no airy philosophizings or aimless wanderings, but on a resolute decision to head *somewhere*; it meant leaving behind the old, or former places, where one not only fled the places but the identities that had grown up and become a part of those places."⁷ As a girl eager to launch into life, Isabel certainly sees in her aunt's offer an opportunity to escape the old reality of her gloomy home in Albany; therefore, like such escapistes as Huckleberry Finn, George Willard and the Hemingway heroes who flee their hometown with the purpose of beginning new lives in other places, Isabel resolutely leaves Albany behind and follows her aunt to Europe. And sharing more or less the same destiny with those escapistes in American fiction, she suffers greatly in her escape. In fact, the irony of the novel lies mainly in this escape motif. As the novel develops, we learn by and by that Isabel, though having escaped from the old, sterile reality, is unfortunately imprisoned anew in an un-

⁴ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974), p. 17.

⁵ For a detailed study of the escape in American fiction, see Sam Bluefarb, *The Escape Motif in the American Novel* (Ohio: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1972).

⁶ Bluefarb, p. 5.

⁷ Bluefarb, p. 8.

happy marriage.

Soon after her first arrival with her aunt in England, Isabel confronts a crucial moment of her life; it involves her choice of a husband. Unlike such novelists as Defoe and Hardy, who seldom allow their protagonists to have options, James, to use the words of Yvor Winters, “displays in all of his more serious work an unmistakable desire to allow his characters unrestricted freedom of choice and to develop his plots out of such choice and out of consequent acts of choice to which the initial acts may lead.”⁸ Isabel, whom Daniel J. Schneider describes as “one of the freest natural spirits in the Western world,”⁹ is definitely free to choose, and perhaps owing to this freedom of choice, she rejects any form of repentance and resolves to stick to the difficult plight of her own making even though she sees no hope in her marriage.

Isabel, an Emma-like character, belongs to “a gallery of *limited* heroines.”¹⁰ Her limitation lies in her immaturity and inability to penetrate the true face of reality. To break through this limitation, the price she pays is high indeed. It is after “finding herself trapped in a painful situation entirely of her own making”¹¹ that she becomes aware of her limitation—an awareness enabling her at last to look at life with a wider scope and a deeper understanding.

The Portrait of a Lady involves the theme of “the road not taken.” Isabel is surrounded by four gentlemen almost simultaneously. She seems to have no difficulty in turning them down except for Gilbert Osmond. Ralph Touchett, her cousin, is perhaps the only man who does not make any proposal to her, although when asked by his father if he is in love with her, he admits that he likes her very much. But he will not marry his cousin:

⁸ *In Defense of Reason* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1947), p. 306.

⁹ *Symbolism: The Mauechean Vision* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 76.

¹⁰ Oscar Cargill, *The Novels of Henry James* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 82.

¹¹ Elizabeth Drew, *The Novel: A Modern Guide to Fifteen English Masterpieces* (New York: Dell, 1969), pp. 229-30.

“. . . I haven't many convictions; but I have three or four that I hold strongly. One is that people, on the whole, had better not marry their cousins. Another is that people in an advanced stage of pulmonary disorder had better not marry at all." (I, p. 259)

Ralph knows that "Isabel has a great deal of imagination" and that "she wishes to be free" (I, p. 261). He thus determines to "put wind in her sails" (I, p. 262). He requests his father to divide his inheritance "into two equal halves and give her the second" (I, p. 261) so that "her being rich will keep her from marrying for money" (I, p. 623). The irony of Ralph's thoughtfulness and generosity is obvious. It is true that Isabel does not marry for money, but Gilbert Osmond does marry her for what she possesses. Ralph must have felt sorry for his ignorance of the wisdom of his father's warning that "a young lady with sixty thousand pounds may fall a victim to the fortune-hunters" (I, pp. 264-65). He desperately wails in the face of Isabel not long before his death, saying that "I believe I ruined you" (I, p. 414). Ralph's awareness arrives too late. Isabel has accepted her fate, and is resolved to maintain the hopeless marriage of her own choice.

In the eyes of the world, either Lord Warburton, a cultivated English aristocrat or Caspar Goodwood, Isabel's American suitor, would easily make an agreeable match for Isabel. She turns them down, however. We are not surprised when Isabel rejects Lord Warburton if we have a sufficient knowledge of her character and her imagination. Freedom is what Isabel cherishes most. The world lies before her; she is free to choose. She needs no offer of any form from any man, whether it be money or social position. She is every inch an adventuress, believing in free will and only beginning to see the world:

"I'm not bent on a life of misery," said Isabel. "I've always been intensely determined to be happy, and I've often believed I should be. I've told people that; you can ask them. But it comes over me every now and then that I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating myself."

"By separating yourself from what?"

"From life. From the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer." (I, p. 187)

Isabel will not permit herself to be captured by Lord Warburton's offer of "the chance of taking the common lot in a comfortable sort of way" (I, p. 187). She believes that Lord Warburton will never give her the kind of life she longs for—a life full of "usual chances and dangers" and of "what most people know and suffer."

Isabel also sees in Caspar Goodwood a danger which will threaten her ambitions. Goodwood represents, to quote S. Gorley Putt, "all that was most energetic and creative in the American commercial myth."¹² In fact, he embodies what America could offer Isabel:

He had received the better part of his education at Harvard College, where, however, he had gained renown rather as gymnast and an oarsman than as a gleaner of more dispersed knowledge. Later on he had learned that the finer intelligence too could vault and pull and strain—might even, breaking the record, treat itself to rare exploits. He had thus discovered in himself a sharp eye for the mystery of mechanics, and had invented an improvement in the cottonspinning process which was now largely used and was known by his name. (I, pp. 163-64)

Strong, active, and enterprising, Goodwood appears to be a more promising suitor than Lord Warburton. Despite his "being infernally in love" (I, p. 220) with Isabel, he is rejected, however. She says to him, "I can't marry you simply to please you" (I, p. 222), and she adds, "I like my liberty too much" (I, p. 228). Her reason for turning Goodwood down is more or less the same as the one she gives Lord Warburton: "I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me" (I, pp. 228-29). On the symbolic level, Isabel is fated to refuse Goodwood because he stands for everything that is the best of America—the new world where Isabel has tried so hard to escape.

In spite of her determination to choose, ironically, "she

¹² *The Fiction of Henry James* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1968), p. 122.

has no options except marriage."¹³ Her marriage with Gilbert Osmond shocks everyone who loves her. They simply refuse to believe that Isabel would marry a man like Osmond who, in the eyes of Mrs. Touchett, is but "an obscure American dilettante, a middle-aged widower with an uncanny child and an ambiguous income" (I, p. 394). And Mrs. Touchett seriously considers "such an alliance, on Isabel's part, would have an air of almost morbid perversity" (I, p. 394). Even Ralph Touchett, who always shows his thoughtfulness and understanding for his cousin, on hearing her engagement with the man, frankly tells Isabel, "I think I've hardly got over my surprise . . . you were the last person I expected to see caught" (II, p. 65). To him, Osmond is "somewhat . . . small," "narrow," and "selfish" (II, p. 70). But Isabel is completely charmed by Osmond:

She had never met a person of so fine a grain. The peculiarity was physical, to begin with, and it extended to impalpabilities. His dense, delicate hair, his overdrawn, retouched features, his clear complexion, ripe without being coarse, the very evenness of the growth of his beard, and that light, smooth slenderness of structure which made the movement of a single one of his fingers produce the effect of an expressive gesture—these personal points struck our sensitive young woman as signs of quality, of intensity, somehow as promises of interest. (I, p. 376)

She, therefore, defends Osmond against the criticism of others, claiming that "in everything that makes one care for people Mr. Osmond is pre-eminent" (II, p. 69).

One more factor which seems no less important in determining Isabel's choice of Osmond is her cheap humanitarianism. As an innocent, inexperienced and tenderhearted girl, she is too ready to bestow her sympathy upon those who are looked down upon as well as those who live less comfortably than she. Hence she would demand of her cousin, "Do you complain of Mr. Osmond because he's not rich? That's just what I like him for. I've fortunately money enough" (II, p. 73). She is simply incapable of resisting the temptation to give.

¹³ Annette Niemtow, "Marriage and the New Woman in *The Portrait of a Lady*," *American Literature*, Vol. 47, no. 3 (November 1975), 392.

But Osmond, as noted by Oscar Cargill, “is Henry James’s most completely evil character.”¹⁴ As it has been plotted, his intention of marrying Isabel is chiefly for her wealth—the fact is a tragic recognition which Isabel eventually reveals to her cousin on the occasion of their last meeting: “He married me for the money” (II, p. 415). And furthermore, when the story proceeds to its falling action, and when all the pretenses vanish and truth is uncovered, she finally realizes that “Madame Merle had married her” (II, p. 327). We know that Madame Merle has once been her close friend, and upon her Isabel has always placed her trust. When Isabel is told by Countess Gemini, Osmond’s sister, of the secret cunningly arranged by Osmond and Madame Merle to fetter her with the marriage bond, she has already suffered enough from that stifling alliance and become what Svetozar Koljević calls “an interesting failure.”¹⁵ She compares her disastrous marriage with the ruins of ancient Rome:

She had long before this taken old Rome into her confidence, for in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe. She rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places, where its very modern quality detached itself and grew objective, so that as she sat in a sun-warmed angle on a winter’s day, or stood in a mouldy church to which no one came, she could almost smile at it and think of its smallness. Small it was, in the large Roman record, and her haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot easily carried her from the less to the greater. She had become deeply, tenderly acquainted with Rome: it interfused and moderated her passion. But she had grown to think of it chiefly as the place where people had suffered. (II, pp. 327-38)

Isabel’s metaphorical as well as metaphysical meditation is not without significance. Her comparison of her disastrous marriage with the ruins of Rome hints at her final return to Rome after her sojourn in England. She resolutely rejects Caspar Goodwood’s second proposal and determines to go back to Rome, to “the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the

¹⁴ Cargill, p. 82.

¹⁵ “The Pitfalls of Perfection in *The Portrait of a Lady*,” in *Yugoslav Perspectives on American Literature: An Anthology*, ed. James L. Thorson (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1980), p. 59.

house of suffocation” to which “Osmond’s beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air” (II, p. 196) to mourn her ruinous marriage, just as she herself often mourns the remains of Rome.

A question often asked by the critics is why Isabel returns to Rome. James himself does not offer any explanation in the novel. Dorothy Van Ghent attributes Isabel’s return to Pansy, the daughter of Osmond and Madame Merle, because “it is there, in the ruin where Pansy has been left, that she [Isabel] has placed roots, found a crevice in which to grow straightly and freshly, found a fertilizing, civilizing relationship between consciousness and circumstances.”¹⁶ Van Ghent apparently offers an optimistic interpretation to the novel, but at the same time she also justifies the decisive action of our heroine. Nevertheless, we must not blink the fact that Isabel, though seasoned and mature now, has never lost her dignity throughout her sufferings. In fact, she is as proud as she once was. Her pride not only forbids her to accept the second proposal of Caspar Goodwood—which, in the eyes of Isabel, is no less an offer again to her—but keeps her from admitting her own mistake publicly:

“Why not, I should like to know? You won’t confess that you’ve made a mistake. You’re too proud.”

“I don’t know whether I’m too proud. But I can’t publish my mistake. I don’t think that’s decent. I’d rather die.”

“You won’t think so always,” said Henrietta.

“I don’t know what great unhappiness might bring me to; but it seems to me I shall always be ashamed. One must accept one’s deed. I married him before all the world; I was perfectly free; it was impossible to do anything more deliberate. One can’t change that way,” Isabel repeated. (II, p. 284)

What Isabel tells her friend Henrietta Stackpole is quite significant in understanding her final decision to return to Rome. Evidently, if she remained in England, she would make known to the world her miserable marriage and publish her mistake.

¹⁶ *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 228.

This is definitely what she will avoid.

One more thing that may be worthy of mentioning in passing is that Isabel, who comes from a country deeply influenced by Puritanism, is a girl who firmly believes in "all the traditional decencies and sanctities of marriage" (II, 245). No evidence indicates that, even in her desperate sufferings, it has ever occurred to her that she might someday violate these decencies and sanctities. Therefore, to respect the sacredness of marriage, she has no other alternative but to return to Rome although she fully realizes that what lies before her is a future of horrible blankness.

So Isabel returns to her husband, to Rome, to "the place where people had suffered." There seems to be no end or remedy for her misery. But she has no choice for she has made one before. It can almost be certain that the returned Isabel will be entirely different from the one who made her first visit to the ancient city a few years ago. She has been initiated, and has learned the meaning of life through her sufferings. She must have fully arrived at a realization that life, after all, is but a mirage, "a world illumined by lurid flashes."

仕女圖：一本啓蒙小說

李有成

摘 要

仕女圖是亨利詹姆斯中期的作品，處理的依然是批評家所謂的國際主題（international theme）。全書敘述的是一位美國少女遠赴歐洲之後的種種遭遇。透過她的遭遇，詹姆斯明白地寫出了歐美兩種文化間的相異之處，以及人物在面臨文化震撼時內心的矛盾與衝突。

若以書中主角伊莎貝個人的遭遇而論，本文作者認為，**仕女圖**無疑是一本啓蒙小說（Bildungsroman）。全書的主要情節大抵環繞着伊莎貝個人的心路歷程進行。詹姆斯敘述了伊莎貝如何從一位天真無邪的美國少女，到歐洲之後如何陷入愛情的騙局中，在吃盡苦頭之餘，又如何變成一位成熟堅強的女性。本文即在探討伊莎貝從無知到成熟的整個過程。伊莎貝原本入世未深，一心只想擺脫美國的舊居，到歐洲去體驗新生活。隨姨媽到英國之後，伊莎貝很快就面臨婚姻的問題。當時伊莎貝的追求者不乏貴族富賈，但伊莎貝却出乎意料之外地下嫁一名出身曖昧的中年鰥夫奧斯蒙，婚後兩人即定居羅馬。其實奧斯蒙的主要目標是伊莎貝自其姨丈手中所繼承的一筆遺產。伊莎貝婚後始知上當，但爲了個人尊嚴，只好逆來順受，雖知婚姻無望，也只有極力忍受。甚至於在回倫敦探望重病的表哥之後，她仍舊毅然回到羅馬去，寧可面對令她窒息的婚姻，也不願意滯留倫敦，更不願意向親友宣佈自己當初所作選擇的錯誤。她認爲當初自己是在自由意志之下所作的選擇，因此，她必須爲自己的選擇負責到底。

伊莎貝個人的遭遇歷經了無知——受苦——啓蒙的過程。從這個角度來看，**仕女圖**不啻是一本啓蒙小說。